

ARTICLE APPEARED  
ON PAGE 25

WALL STREET JOURNAL  
11 July 1985

# A Connected Terrorist Under Every Bed

"The Free World has now endured more than a decade of relentless, spectacularly destructive bombing." This was the suitably apocalyptic start to a Wall Street Journal editorial on June 25, and as the writer pounded away at his keyboard, anger drove sense and syntax out of the computer till we were left with mere notations of the paranoid world view that has come to be associated with these pages: "Other events: the attack on Pope Paul II, the Munich Olympics massacre, Aldo Moro, KAL Flight 007, the Armenian assassination of Turkish diplomats, the assassination of Lord Mountbatten, the 'yellow rain' attacks against the unsubjugated Hmong people of Laos."

The mechanism of paranoia links discrete phenomena and perceives in them a

## Viewpoint

by Alexander Cockburn

conspiracy against the paranoid victim. A man once called me to say that planes circling over his house were filled with secret agents broadcasting unsettling messages to him via the fillings in his mouth. It turns out that he had bad teeth and lived near LaGuardia Airport. What pattern is there in the list of violent acts spluttered out in the WSJ's editorial? Are we somehow to assume, to take three of them, that the IRA splinter group that blew up Lord Mountbatten is in league with the Armenians and that both are in some way connected with "yellow rain," which itself no longer attracts much credence as a toxic substance outside of its most enthusiastic sponsors in the WSJ's editorial offices?

The pattern apparently inferred by the WSJ editorial writer and, to judge by his speech to the American Bar Association Monday, at least one loyal reader in the form of President Reagan, is that these violent acts enjoy common sponsorship by socialist-bloc countries and ultimately and most particularly by the Soviet Union. The WSJ editorial did generously concede that not every bombing in the world is planned by the Soviet Union and its allies, but this concession came as a *pro forma* addendum to the central thesis of a "Terror Network."

The words "Terror Network" bring us to a great heroine of the WSJ editorial writers and probably of the president, too, in the form of Claire Sterling. She is a freelance American writer living in Italy and, as the WSJ editorial gratefully recognized, has been an enthusiastic exponent of the notion of a Terror Network sourced in Mos-

cow. Her most celebrated illustration of the workings of this same network has been the so-called "Bulgarian Connection" (Paranoid Plots always look better if they begin with capital letters), which supposes that Ali Agca, the Turkish would-be killer of the pope, was prompted to his assassination bid by the KGB, working through its Bulgarian "proxy."

Though she is perhaps the best known of the Bulgarian Connecters, Ms. Sterling has not worked alone. Other assiduous Connecters have been Paul Henze, Arnaud de Borchgrave, Marvin Kalb of NBC and Michael Ledeen. For the better part of the past three years they've had the run of the airwaves and of both the news and editorial pages in major U.S. newspapers such as The Wall Street Journal and the New York Times to make their charges and often to insinuate (a traditional part of the paranoid vision) that nonbelievers in the Connection are therefore by definition part of the Connection themselves. And as the months and years have rolled by since the Connection was first suggested to an American audience on this page by Paul Henze in October 1981 (eight months before Agca thought of it himself, a year after his arrest), these advocates of the Connection have been the ubiquitous "experts," ex-officio members of the prosecution of Sergei Antonov, the unfortunate Bulgarian, a political prisoner actually, who has been in jail or under house arrest in Rome, without trial, since Nov. 25, 1982.

Anyone who took the trouble to examine the case for a Bulgarian Connection rapidly found it to be riddled with absurdities. The imputed Soviet/Bulgarian motive for killing the pope was his support for the Polish Solidarity movement. But the Agca-Bulgarian Connection was supposedly made in July 1980, at least a month before the proclamation of Solidarity in August of that year. Agca first threatened to kill the pope (as a Christian Threat to The Moslem World) in 1979, during John Paul II's visit to Turkey. Aside from endless inconsistencies of this nature, no witness or material fact has, to this day, been produced to support any of Agca's allegations of a Bulgarian Connection.

None of this bothered the Connecters, nor dampened their benign reception in the U.S. mass media (with the honorable exception of the Washington Post's Michael Dobbs) until the trial of Agca's alleged accomplices began in Rome on May 27. Since that day a profound and embarrassed silence has overtaken the Connecters. Ms. Sterling's byline suddenly disappeared from reports of the trial filed by the New York Times's Rome bureau. Other Connecters appear to be lying low. The reason

is not hard to find. As anyone who has studied his "testimony" down the years knows well, Agca is not proving to be a very reliable or convincing witness. But this time his antics are being observed by a large press corps and a vigorous judge. Hardly had the trial begun before Agca declared he was Jesus Christ. Later he offered to resurrect a "scientifically dead person" in the presence of Ronald Reagan. On June 25, near the end of a month in court, the Italian prosecutor said of his main witness, "If he wanted to destroy his own credibility he has succeeded magnificently," and Agca said despondently that "I cannot invent anything more," perhaps in response to Judge Severino Santapichi's angry remark to him that "you can't come out with a new truth every time you open your mouth."

Along with Agca's collapse has come some interesting testimony in a separate Italian Mafia trial suggesting that Agca may well have been coached into his allegations of a Bulgarian Connection by agents of SISMI, the Italian agency for military intelligence. SISMI had in fact anticipated Agca's Connection, claiming a mere six days after the assassination attempt that it had been ordered by the late Soviet defense minister Dmitri Ustinov.

In other words, Exhibit A in the Terror Network is in a very sorry state right now and its collapse should act as a warning of how delusive paranoid visions can be, and how useless they are as a guide to how the U.S. should comport itself in the world today. For one thing, the paranoid vision is monocular. The WSJ editorialist who writes about the "relentless, spectacularly destructive bombing" of the Free World apparently forgets that the most destructive bombing in the Western Hemisphere in the last decade is being achieved with U.S.-supplied bombs, planes and supervision by President Duarte's air force in El Salvador, with thousands dead in consequence. An honor roll of terrorism that excludes South Africa—as does both the WSJ editorialist and President Reagan—looks somewhat lopsided to many people in the world. The bombs detonated in Nicaragua by the contras are not supplied by Bulgarians or the KGB.

Above all the paranoid vision eschews facts in favor of fantasy, sees international politics mostly in terms of plots by the dark hand of Moscow. The result is a paranoid foreign policy that provokes ridicule or hatred in much of the rest of the world, neither of which emotions are in the best interests of the U.S.

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